



# Larry King Center Evaluation

## Participant Perspectives of the School Readiness Planning Process

August 2011

Prepared by:

Center for Child and Family Policy  
Duke University  
Box 90545-0545

Beth Gifford, Ph.D.,  
Kelly Evans, M.P.H.,  
Leslie Babinski, Ph.D.,  
and Audrey Foster, B.S.

**[www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu](http://www.childandfamilypolicy.duke.edu)**

## Table of Contents

Executive Summary .....	3
Introduction .....	5
The Larry King Center's Theory of Change .....	6
The School Readiness Initiative .....	8
The Current Report: Formative Feedback from Participants in the School Readiness Planning Process .....	10
Research on Interagency Initiatives .....	11
Methods .....	12
Results .....	13
Description of the Survey Respondents .....	13
Action Team Member Motivation for Participating in the Process .....	14
Participant Perceptions of the Planning Process .....	16
Feedback on the Overall Planning Process .....	18
Community Perceptions of the School Readiness Plan .....	20
Perceptions of the Larry King Center's Leadership in the School Readiness Plan Process .....	23
Participant Reflections of the School Readiness Plan .....	24
Summary and Conclusions .....	29
References .....	31

## Executive Summary

In September 2009 the Council for Children's Rights unveiled the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures (LKC). The LKC serves as a resource to the community *"maximizing the effectiveness and impact of work being done for children by providers, agencies and funders."* The LKC has chosen three initial priorities to address in Mecklenburg County: creating access to health and mental health care, reducing the incidence and impact of abuse and neglect, and ensuring that children are ready for school.

This report examines community feedback on an initial community planning process and plan for one of the LKC's initial priority areas, early school readiness. This report summarizes the LKC's theory of change, describes the initial planning phase for the school readiness action plan, and highlights the participants' perspectives regarding the planning process. The report also examines the perceptions of community engagement partners and action team members in relation to how the implementation of the plan will go. By incorporating feedback from the community, the LKC can improve the process for future initiatives. Moreover, the participants' feedback on potential barriers to plan implementation can lend insight into some areas where the LKC may want to focus attention as this plan is being implemented.

Below is a summary of some of the major highlights from the report and recommended next steps.

- *Interest in the topic, either professionally- or personally motivated participation in the action team process.* Others were drawn to the process by their respect for the leadership of the LKC, their interest in being part of the decision making process, and for opportunities to network and learn what others in the community are doing.
- *Elements related to the success of a multi-agency effort were apparent in the action planning process.* Nearly all action team members felt that the planning process incorporated strong leadership, adequate administration and management, and was efficient. For example, action team members felt that their contributions were respected at the meetings (98.9% either *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*). Action team members felt that the objectives for each meeting were clear (98.9% *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*) and that the meetings were a productive use of time (95.7% *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*).

- *Community engagement partners and action team members rated the school readiness plan highly.* Over 90% of respondents rated the overall school readiness plan as *excellent* (25.8%), *very good* (49.2%), or *good* (17.2%) – and none of the respondents indicated that the plan was *poor*. Almost all respondents believed that the plan focuses on the right priorities.
- *The Larry King Center was considered to have displayed strong leadership skills.* Respondents generally thought that the LKC had accomplished the following “*to a great extent*”: communicating the vision of school readiness (86.4%); fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness among team members (83.6%); including a diversity of people and organizations on the team (77.1%); empowering team members (79.1%); and creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced (83.6%).
- *The diversity of the individuals involved in the planning process could be expanded.* Respondents generally felt that the LKC included a diverse group of people and organizations on the team, with 77.1% of respondents indicating this “*to a great extent*” and 16.5% indicating *somewhat*. However, relative to other measures of the LKC’s leadership on school readiness (such as communication of the vision and empowerment of team members), this measure was rated lower. Many participants provided feedback that inclusion of a more diverse group including representatives of the Hispanic population, community leaders, business leaders, and school personnel – would be desirable.
- *Contextual factors may pose challenges for implementing the plan.* While most respondents expressed confidence that the plan would be implemented, respondents suggested that contextual barriers may prevent implementation. The three barriers to plan implementation most often cited by participants were funding, political will, and public will. This suggests that the LKC may need to devote increased effort to overcoming these hurdles in order to make progress on the school readiness initiative.

As the LKC works with community agencies to build a system for early school readiness, the lessons learned through this process can guide resource use. The respondents to this survey acknowledged the leadership skills of the LKC but raised questions about the availability of resources and the community’s political will and public will to implement the plan. Addressing these factors will be an essential step into implanting the school readiness plan.

## Introduction

In September 2009 the Council for Children's Rights unveiled the Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures (LKC). The LKC aims to *"maximize the effectiveness and impact of work being done for children, agencies, and funders. The work is accomplished through four roles: research and evaluation, strategic planning, public policy advocacy, and public awareness and community engagement."* Funding for the first three years of the Center is provided by the Bank of America Foundation, The Duke Endowment, Foundation for the Carolinas, the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation, and the Wachovia Foundation of Wells Fargo.

The LKC has chosen three initial priorities to address in Mecklenburg County: *creating access to health and mental health care, reducing the incidence and impact of abuse and neglect, and ensuring that children are ready for school.* In October 2010 the initial work on school readiness began.

The Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University was hired to conduct an evaluation of the LKC's efforts. One purpose of the evaluation is to provide formative information that can be used by the LKC to help improve their programs and practices. This is accomplished by providing timely feedback on the work that has recently been conducted and is the goal of the current report. Future reports will focus on different aspects of the evaluation such as a long-term evaluation strategy for the LKC's efforts and the community's perception of the LKC's added value.

This report examines the strategy that the LKC has employed to address school readiness and the feasibility of this approach for other priority areas. We begin by examining the overall theory of change and how the approach taken by the LKC for mobilizing action around school readiness fits in with the theory. We then report on participant reflections of the approach. In particular, we examine how participants felt about the planning process, the school readiness plan that was developed, the leadership ability of the LKC, and the feasibility of implementing the plan, along with potential challenges to implementation.

## The Larry King Center's Theory of Change

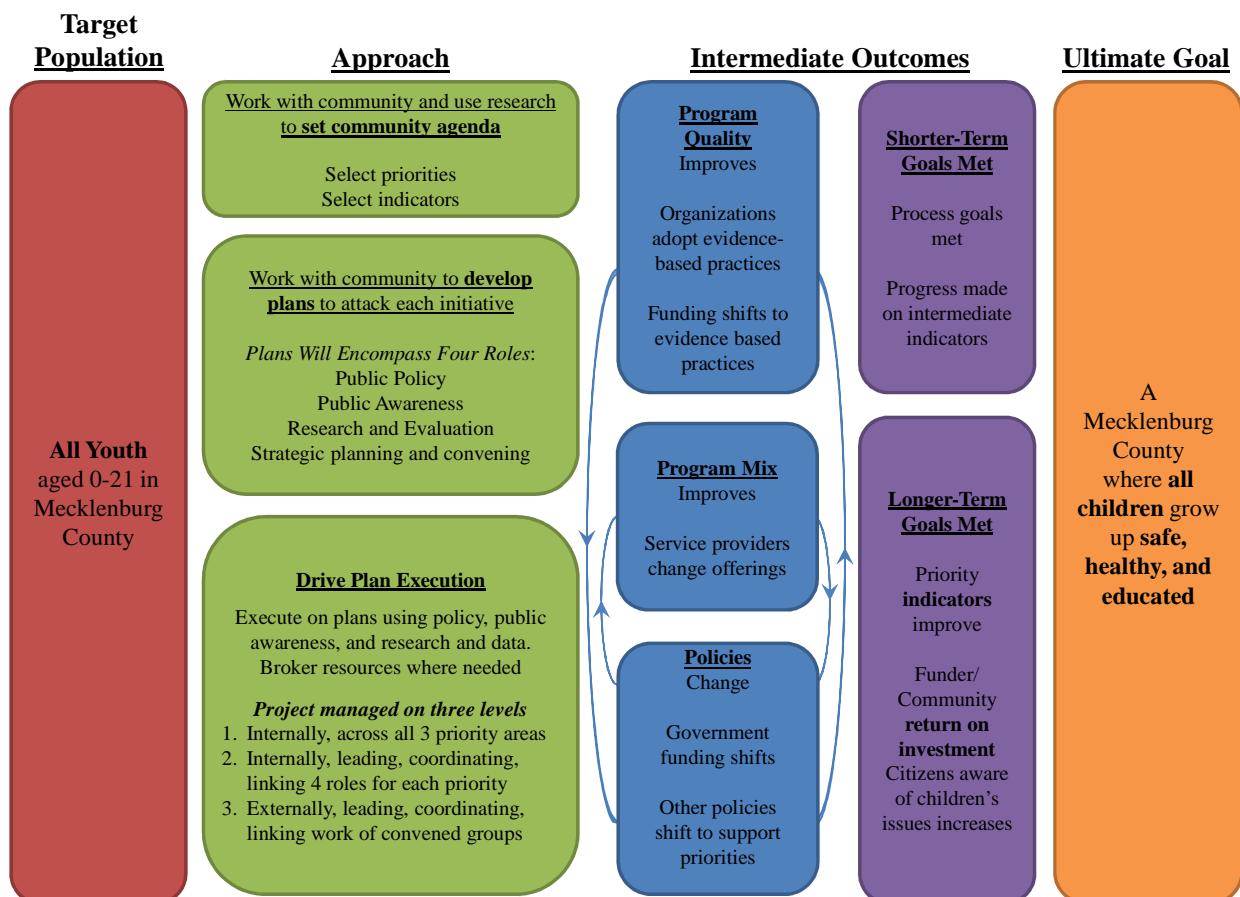
A theory of change, developed by the Bridgespan Group, describes the mechanisms that a community or an organization plans to use to promote change. Figure 1 displays the Larry King Center's overarching theory of change for working with the community to bring about systems-level change. The **target population** is youth aged 0-21 in Mecklenburg County. The target population encompasses youth of a wide range of ages as well as needs. Thus, any one intervention is likely to address the needs of only a subset of the entire target group. The LKC envisions multiple priority areas being addressed within a given time span.

The **approach** adopted by the LKC for bringing change has three main elements. The first element is working with the community *to use research to set the community agenda*. The second element is working with the community to *develop plans* to address each initiative. The plans will encompass each of the four roles: addressing public policy, raising public awareness, using research and evaluation, and strategic planning and convening. The third element is to *drive execution of the plan*. Executing the plan involves project management both internally and externally. Within the Larry King Center, implementing the plan will require that each priority area (e.g., early school readiness, access to health and mental health care, and preventing child abuse) continues to be addressed. Internally, the LKC has to lead and coordinate efforts that make use of the four roles of the Center (addressing public policy, raising public awareness, using research and evaluation, and strategic planning and convening). Externally, project management involves leading and coordinating the work for community groups engaged in the process.

The **ultimate goal** of this work is for Mecklenburg County to become a place where all children grow up safe, healthy, and educated. While this long-term goal will take several years to achieve, tracking a series of **intermediate outcomes** can help assess whether progress is occurring in the intended direction. The LKC envisions three intermediate outcomes. The first is *improved program quality*, which will be evidenced by the adoption of, and increased funding for, evidenced-based practices. The second is an *improved mix of programs* being offered, evidenced by changes in what is offered by the community's service providers. The third intermediate outcome is *policy change*, which will be evidenced by shifts in government funding and changes in policies to support the stated priorities. Even these intermediate outcomes can be

further subdivided into short-term goals that often rely on process goals being met (e.g., at least 100 community organizations were engaged in the planning process or the number of newspaper articles that mention school readiness) and long-term goals such as observed improvement on indicators of child well-being, increased awareness of the importance of the issues by the public, and increased return on investment for the funders and the community. These intermediate outcomes are interrelated. For example, policy improvements may improve program quality.

**Figure 1. Larry King Center preliminary Theory of Change**



Source: Bridgespan Group (2009). Council for Children's Rights Final Deliverable

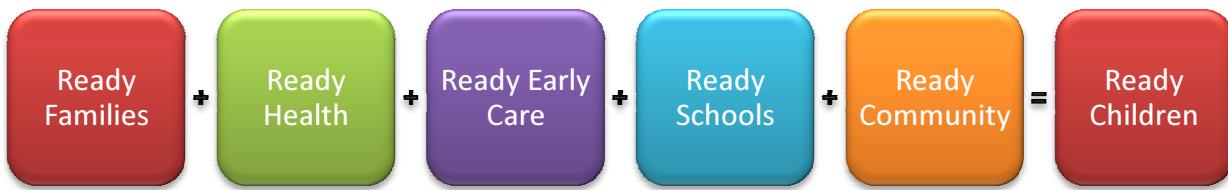
## The School Readiness Initiative

During 2009 and 2010 the LKC worked with a research council to select priorities for the community. The research council consists of seven members from UNC Charlotte, Communities in Schools, Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools, and the Institute for Social Capital. Selection of the priority areas was driven by research and data. First, after carefully reviewing the literature on child development, the LKC determined that ensuring children are prepared for school was an important goal. Second, because there are cost-effective, empirically-based programs and interventions that prepare children for school, the LKC determined that there were actionable steps that could be taken to address this issue. Third, after examining the indicators on a variety of measures related to child wellbeing and community service capacity, it was determined that this was an important unmet need in the community.

On October 21<sup>st</sup> and November 9<sup>th</sup> 2010, the LKC convened meetings designed to engage the community in a conversation about school readiness.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 150 community leaders, agency directors, and community members took part in these meetings. During these meetings representatives from the LKC:

- Provided an overview of the LKC;
- Presented research and data to support the decision for selecting school readiness as a priority area;
- Explained the process that would be used to develop a community action plan to address school readiness in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg area;
- Presented the “school readiness equation which describes the factors necessary for children to be ready for school as shown in Figure 2;<sup>1</sup>
- Sought input from meeting participants on the general plan, the community’s strengths and areas of improvement, as well as who else should be included in the planning process; and
- Asked for volunteers who could serve on the action teams.

**Figure 2. School Readiness Equation**



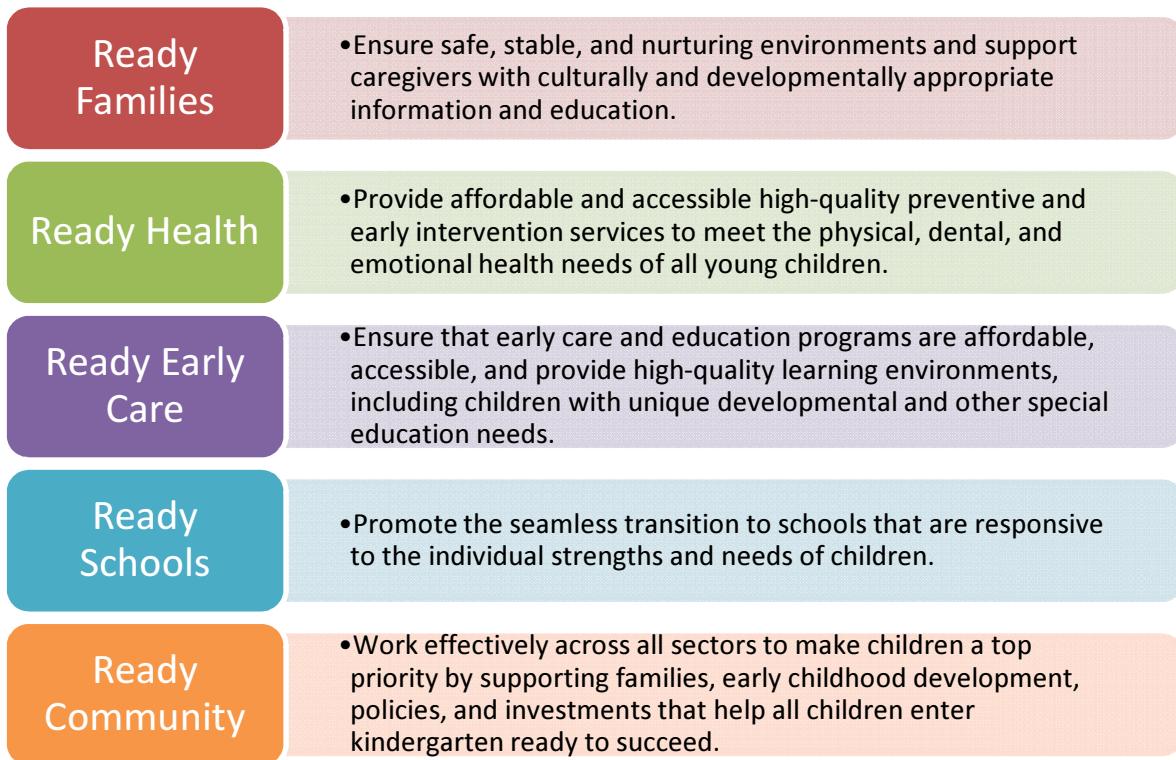
Six action teams were formed to develop the community plan for school readiness. Five of these teams were composed primarily of community professionals and experts who serve children in Mecklenburg County. These teams correspond to the elements of the school readiness equation shown above: ready families, ready health, ready early care, ready schools, and ready community. Each action team had a total of three meetings, which were jointly facilitated by a LKC representative and a community partner. The three meetings were highly structured. During the first meeting the team was expected to establish objectives, during the second meeting the team was to recommend strategies to achieve the objectives, and during the third meeting the team was to identify initial action steps to implement the strategies.

The sixth action team was composed of a racially, ethnically, and economically diverse group of parents from Mecklenburg County with at least one child under the age of six. This team provided feedback on the plans from the other groups to inform the full school readiness plan.

The LKC compiled the work from each of the groups into a comprehensive plan, *Unlocking the Potential of a Community: The Plan for School Readiness*, which was presented on June 2, 2011<sup>2</sup> (see Figure 3 for goals). The plan describes the objectives, strategies, expected outcomes, resources, and long-term indicators that each action team developed. This plan also outlines the initial steps for implementation. This includes a) establishing workgroups which are focused on a specific aspect of the plan; b) organizing issue-specific community forums to continue community engagement and encourage information sharing; c) working with the LKC's research committee to seek guidance on strategies; d) establishing a funders' collaborative to keep funders informed of research and data related to children's issues, encourage alignment of funding priorities, and support collective tracking of outcomes and impact; e) launching a public awareness campaign related to school readiness to educate the entire community; and f) working

with the LKC Trustees who provide thought leadership, strategic input, and advocate for systematic improvements related to child-serving agencies.

**Figure 3. Goals of the Community Plan for School Readiness**



### **The Current Report: Formative Feedback from Participants in the School Readiness Planning Process**

This report describes the results of a survey sent to participants about the planning process, the action plan, and the ability of the Larry King Center to lead this effort. The goal of the survey was to learn what aspects of the planning process worked well and what could be improved upon. The action planning team members, as well as community members who attended the June convening, were also asked to share their thoughts on whether they believed that this planning process and the work that went into developing a plan would lead to community changes.

## Research on Interagency Initiatives

Community partnerships are frequently used to address complex issues that cross multiple sectors. Elements that predict success of these initiatives have been widely studied. Although there are not outcome data at this early juncture, ( just several weeks following the release of the community plan) this prior research can inform us of key process indicators to measure.

Members of the action teams provided feedback about the planning process across several domains that previous research has linked to success in interagency efforts. These include:

- *Leadership:* Leadership is an important component of success for an interagency, multi-sector collaborative effort. Some measures of leadership include empowering partners, fostering respect, being inclusive of varied opinions and backgrounds, and combining different perspectives.<sup>3</sup>
- *Administration and Management:* One domain that predicts partnership effectiveness is the ability of the partnership to communicate and to coordinate activities and efforts. This includes factors such as communicating the meeting objectives clearly, informing team members of the work of the larger group, helping team members understand how their work will contribute to the larger picture, and providing team members with information so that they are prepared for meetings.
- *Partnership Efficiency:* Partnership efficiency relates to the degree to which partners make good use of resources.<sup>3</sup> One measure of partnership efficiency is the degree to which partners feel that their time was put to good use.

### *Contextual Factors*

In addition to the factors listed as important for the planning process, several contextual factors are particularly salient for implementing the action plan, including political will, public will, and resources.

- *Political will:* National, state, local, and even organizational policies affect plan implementation.<sup>4</sup> Political will relates to the ability, willingness, and commitment of decision makers to reform the status quo.

- *Public will:* How a social problem is perceived by the public, as well as the types of solutions that are deemed appropriate, influence whether or not that problem will receive attention from political leaders.<sup>5</sup> Heightened public will for an issue can raise the level of attention that decision makers pay to it and in turn help ensure that more resources are devoted to the issue.
- *Resources:* Ensuring that all young children in Mecklenburg County are prepared for school is a large endeavor that is unlikely to be accomplished solely on volunteer efforts. The availability of funding and staff time for school readiness initiatives will affect the ability of the community to fully implement the plan.

## Methods

The sample frame for the survey included each member of the action planning teams as well as community engagement partners who did not serve on an action team but who attended the June 2011 meeting where the plan was unveiled. To avoid any potential bias in the results, employees of the LKC or the Council of Children's Rights were excluded from the survey.

A Web-based survey was emailed to participants on June 8<sup>th</sup>, 2011. A paper version of the survey was made available to four individuals in the sample frame who did not have access to email. Two paper surveys were provided in Spanish for participants who do not speak English as their primary language. Potential survey participants were sent two follow-up emails and were then called up to four times and asked to complete the survey. Four respondents who completed descriptive information about him/herself but did not answer any of the substantive questions in the survey are not included in the survey results.

Of the 151 individuals in the sample frame, 131 completed the survey for a response rate of 86.8%. This strong response rate provides confidence that the results reported below are representative of the individuals who participated on the action teams and as community engagement partners.

## Results

### Description of the Survey Respondents

Of the 131 survey respondents, 73.3% were female, 17.6% were male, and 9.2% did not provide information on gender (see Table 1). The majority of respondents identified themselves as White (63.4%). Respondents also identified themselves as African American (26.0%) and Hispanic (1.5%) or Asian (0.8%). Respondents (non-parent action team) were asked how long they had been working in their current field in Charlotte. The group had much experience in Charlotte with an average of 13.3 years (range 1 year - 38 years).

**Table 1. Descriptive statistics of survey respondents**

Gender			Race/ethnicity		
	N	%		N	%
<b>Female</b>	96	73.3	<b>White</b>	83	63.4
<b>Male</b>	23	17.6	<b>Black</b>	34	26
<b>Unknown</b>	12	9.2	<b>Other</b>	4	3.1
			<b>Unknown</b>	10	7.6

Source: Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

Of the 131 survey respondents, 96 were members of an action team (73.3%). Table 2 describes the number of participants on each team and the response rate per team. The remaining respondents are community members who are engaged in the school readiness plan but who did not serve on an action team. Thirty-five individuals (26.7% of respondents) did not participate on an action team. However, 48.6% of the respondents who did not participate on an action team had a co-worker who did.

**Table 2. Response rate by Action Team**

	Number that served on the action team	Number of Completed Surveys	Response Rate for Team
<b>Ready Families</b>	23	22	95.7%
<b>Ready Health</b>	10	10	100%
<b>Ready Early Care</b>	20	18	90.0%
<b>Ready Communities</b>	20	16	80.0%
<b>Ready Schools</b>	19	13	68.4%
<b>Parent Action Team</b>	22	17	77.3%

Source: Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

Most action team members participated in two (40.6 %) or three (42.7%) of the three action planning meetings. The action team members had diverse positions in their organizations.<sup>a</sup>

- Agency administrator 32.5% (n=25),
- Agency staff 31.2% (n=24),
- Community volunteer 10.4% (n=8),
- Advocate 2.6% (n=2),
- Board member 2.6% (n=2), and
- Other 20.8% (n=16), including university faculty members, court staff, and a journalist.

## Action Team Member Motivation for Participating in the Process

To understand what motivated individuals to participate in the process, action team members were asked to share their reasons for participating. Understanding motivation for participation may help the LKC recruit participants for future initiatives. We reviewed the responses and grouped them into five main categories:

- Personal or professional interest,
- Support for the work of the Larry King Center,
- Desire to participate in positive change,
- Importance of community collaboration, and
- Opportunity to give a voice to children.

Many of the participants noted that the topic of school readiness was important to them personally. Others noted that the topic was aligned with their professional interests.

*Transition to kindergarten is an area of professional and personal interest. I believe that of all parties involved, the family is key and critical, and that creating ready families is the single most important factor in a child's school success.*

---

<sup>a</sup> Organization position was asked only of action members from the non-parent action teams. Two survey respondents did not respond to this question.

Five respondents mentioned valuing the work of the LKC or the Council for Children's Rights.

*The Larry King Center did a good job of publicizing and promoting this opportunity and I wanted to support it.*

*Charlotte needs community catalysts like the Council for Children to be successful advocates for children in Mecklenburg County. We have grown so quickly and I don't think the community has adopted a culture of support for children and education commensurate with the growing needs. I am grateful for CforC for their leadership and wanted to contribute to this effort.*

Several respondents noted that they wanted to be involved in influencing decision making, believing that the process would lead to positive change and/or that they wanted to contribute.

*The developmental needs of young children are so important, and so many of these needs are being overlooked in the present educational climate, both locally and nationally. I wanted to be part of a team that recognizes these needs, and articulates plans to local powers who can impact change.*

*I attended a general session in November where the vision was initially presented. I participated in a small round table activity where I shared many of the same concerns as other advocates and professionals. I immediately expressed interest. It was important to me that I play a role in advocating for homeless children and families in particular.*

Other respondents noted an opportunity for networking, collaboration, and learning what others in the community are doing.

*It is critical for our agency to work collaboratively with the community to identify, prioritize and act on improving the health of our residents. No solution is successful in a vacuum and this process was appealing because we had the focus of leveraging existing programs, raising awareness and charting some proactive and measurable action plans.*

*I believe that it is useful to try having a coordinated community approach to school readiness as a long-term strategy for avoiding perpetual generational poverty. No other current effort in that regard appears to be in place. The school system obviously cannot address the severe lack of readiness that many deprived kids have.*

Two respondents noted that they participated in the planning to help give a voice to young people. For example:

*I wanted an opportunity to be a voice for children. So many decisions are made which have huge impacts on them and they do not have a say about it. There is a large number of children in our community that have adult worries and struggles even I at the age of 40 have not experienced. I saw this as an opportunity to help these children in an area that is extremely important to their livelihood....quality education.*

## Participant Perceptions of the Planning Process

In general, respondents indicated that the number of members on the action team was about right (90.5%; n=95), with five respondents reporting that it was too many and four respondents reporting that it was too few. While most respondents thought that three meetings were sufficient to accomplish the goals of the planning process (72.5%; n=66), Over a quarter thought that the number of meetings was too few (27.5%; n=25). Respondents listed organizations and individuals who were not involved in the process but should have been. Each of the following organizations received one nomination:

- CMC
- Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools
- Charlotte Housing Authority
- City Council, County Commission
- DSS
- NBCDI
- Project Life
- Salvation Army
- School Board
- School Teachers
- UNCC-child and family professor
- United Way
- Mayor
- County Commissioners
- Preachers/Pastors of the Community
- Presby

Action team members were asked to rate the planning meetings on several items related to how well the meetings were organized, facilitated, and how well they achieved their goals; these results are summarized below in Table 3.

*Leadership:* Participants rated aspects of the leadership at the meetings highly. Over 90% of respondents either *strongly agreed, agreed, or slightly agreed* that the right mix of people were at the meetings, that their contributions were respected during the meeting, and that a diverse group of opinions contributed to the recommendations. It is worth noting that 25.3% of participants only *slightly agreed* that they were well informed about the work of the other action teams.

*Administration and Management:* Participants rated measures that are related to the handling of administrative and management tasks of the planning process. Over 90% of the participants *strongly agreed, agreed, or slightly agreed* that the objectives for each meeting were clear, the team accomplished the stated objectives at each meeting, they felt well informed about the work of the other action teams, and felt prepared to contribute to the overall school readiness planning process.

*Partnership Efficiency:* Almost all participants (95.8%) *strongly agreed, agreed, or slightly agreed* that the meetings were a productive use of their time.

*General Satisfaction with the Process:* Two measures were included to assess participant general satisfaction with the planning process. Over 90% of the participants *strongly agreed, agreed, or slightly agreed* that they would participate in a similar action team in the future and that the Larry King Center was the right group to facilitate the meeting.

**Table 3. Action planning members' perceptions of planning meetings**

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Slightly Agree	Slightly Disagree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>The right mix of people were at the meetings (n=90)</b>	33.3%	45.6%	14.4%	3.3%	1.1%	2.2%
<b>My contributions were respected during the meetings (n=91)</b>	61.5%	33.0%	4.4%	1.1%	0%	0%
<b>A diverse group of opinions contributed to the recommendations (n=91)</b>	42.9%	45.1%	6.6%	3.3%	1.1%	1.1%
<b>The Larry King Center was the right group to facilitate the meetings (n=89)</b>	64.0%	30.3%	2.3%	1.1%	1.1%	1.1%
<b>The objectives for each meeting were clear (n=91)</b>	56.0%	38.5%	4.4%	0%	0%	1.1%
<b>My team accomplished the stated objectives at each meeting (n=91)</b>	39.6%	52.8%	6.6%	1.1%	0%	0%
<b>I felt well informed about the work of the other action teams (n=91)</b>	31.9%	35.2%	25.3%	4.4%	2.2%	1.1%
<b>I felt prepared to contribute at the meetings (n=90)</b>	41.1%	45.6%	11.1%	1.1%	0%	1.1%
<b>I understood how our work contributed to the overall school readiness planning process (n=91)</b>	46.2%	42.9%	8.8%	2.2%	0%	0%
<b>The meetings were a productive use of my time (n=91)</b>	42.9%	44.0%	8.8%	3.3%	1.1%	0%
<b>I would participate in a similar action team in the future (n=91)</b>	49.5%	41.8%	5.5%	2.2%	0%	1.1%

Source: Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

### Feedback on the Overall Planning Process

Participants were asked to provide feedback on how the overall planning process could be improved. Eight respondents commented on the mix of individuals on the action teams. These respondents suggested inclusion of:

- teachers,
- community leaders who are unaware of the plan,
- non-stakeholders who would be less biased,
- parents on each team,
- representatives of Hispanic and Muslim populations, and
- fewer academic/policy “wonks”.

Two respondents offered suggestions for additional pieces of information that could have been shared with the teams particularly related to the work that has already occurred in the community.

*...highlighting the work of several funders and non-profit agencies that have been extremely focused on Early Childhood School Readiness for years in this community. Much of what was "discovered" during the process has been going on in this community for the last 20 years when school-readiness was not the buzz word it is currently.*

*Spend a little more time educating the participants about existing issues and resources at the onset. I know the time was limited, but I would feel more certain about the validity of the outcomes if the participants were a bit better informed about what is good or adequate, what is needed, and what the gaps are in each area. America speaks was good at this. There was a lot of talk about EBP, but it is such a moving and growing issue, it needs to be defined for participants this community.*

One respondent suggested having more teams, each of which had a more narrow focus area. Another respondent mentioned needing more time to fully discuss the issues related to early school readiness.

*Is not enough diversity on the team or time to really flesh out the real issues and grapple with the problems facing this community. What is quality education for young children? Why can't we agree on that? What should children be learning in pre-k programs? What does the research say about what skills children need in the future? How do we reach parents with the message that computers, videos, t.v., learning abc's, is not how children learn? What does brain research tell us about learning and physical activity? Where are the flaws in the star-rating system? I believe that we have to be committed to spending time, energy, etc. to work on the problem. I hope that is what will happen next.*

## Community Perceptions of the School Readiness Plan

Members of the action teams, as well as members who participated in the final meeting, were asked to rate a) the objectives, strategies, and action steps developed during the process, and b) the overall school readiness plan. For each question, the respondents rated the two very similarly with about a quarter of respondents indicating that they were *excellent*, about half indicating that it was *very good*, and most of the remaining indicating *good*; these results are summarized below in Table 4.

**Table 4. Participant perceptions of the school readiness plan**

	Don't Know	Poor	Fair	Good	Very Good	Excellent
<b>Objectives, strategies, and action steps developed during the process (n=128)</b>	3.9%	0%	2.3%	18.8%	51.6%	23.4%
<b>Overall School Readiness Plan (n=128)</b>	6.3%	0%	1.6%	17.2%	49.2%	25.8%

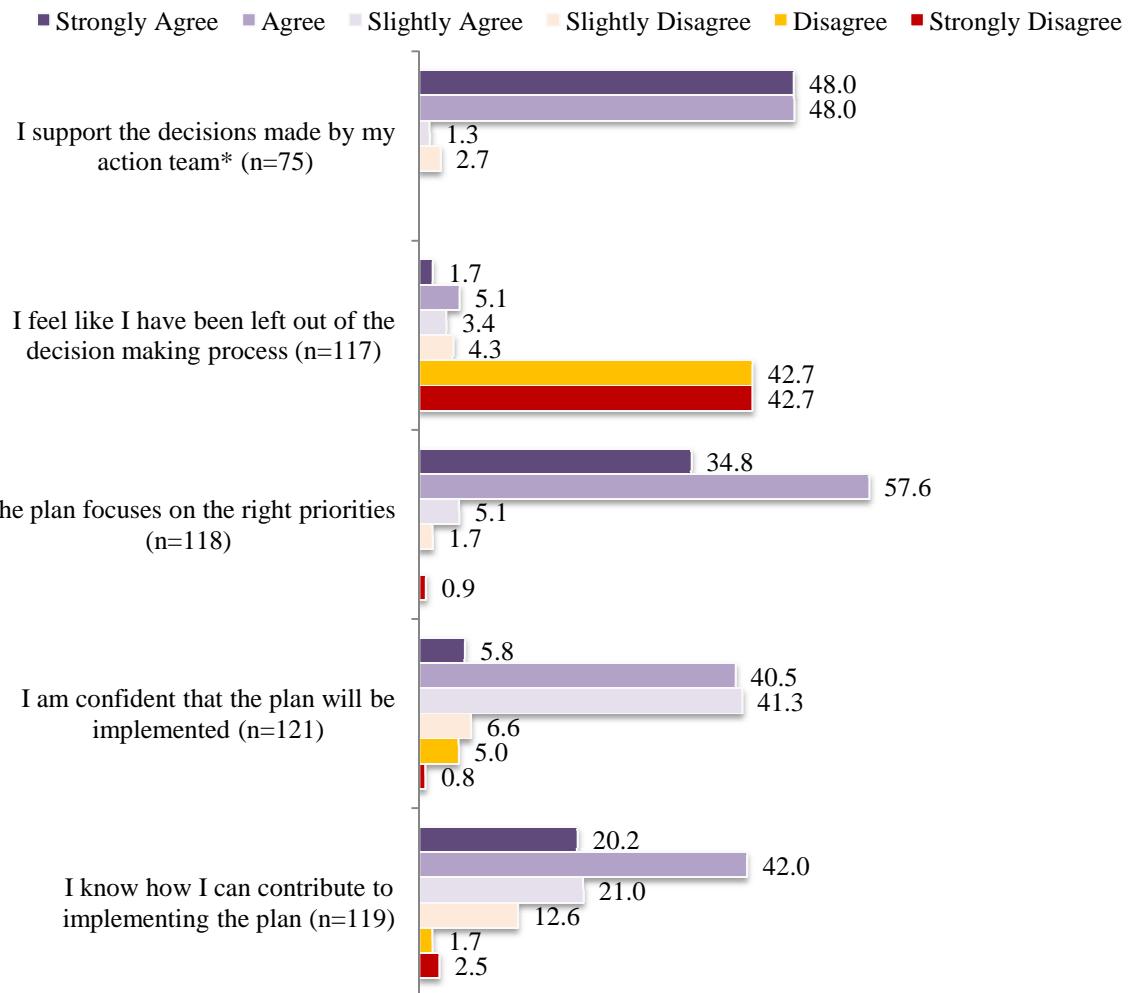
*Source:* Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

Community members were asked to reflect upon the plan on key elements that have been linked to successful initiatives (see figure 4 below). Action team members indicated that they support the decisions made by their team with 96.0% *strongly agreeing* or *agreeing* with that statement. While most participants *disagreed* with the statement "I feel like I have been left out of the decision making process," 10.2% *slightly agreed*, *agreed*, or *strongly agreed*. Most survey respondents *strongly agreed* (34.8%), *agreed* (57.6%), or *slightly agreed* (5.1%) that the plan focuses on the right priorities.

Only 5.8% of respondents *strongly agreed* with the statement "I am confident that the plan will be implemented." Another 81.8% of respondents *agreed* (40.5%) or *slightly agreed* (41.3%) with that statement. The relatively high percentage of participants in the *slightly agree* category may suggest that survey respondents are uncertain that the plan will be implemented.

While most participants know how they can contribute to implementing the plan, 16.8% *strongly disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *slightly disagreed* that they knew how to contribute.

**Figure 4. Respondents rating of the school readiness plan**



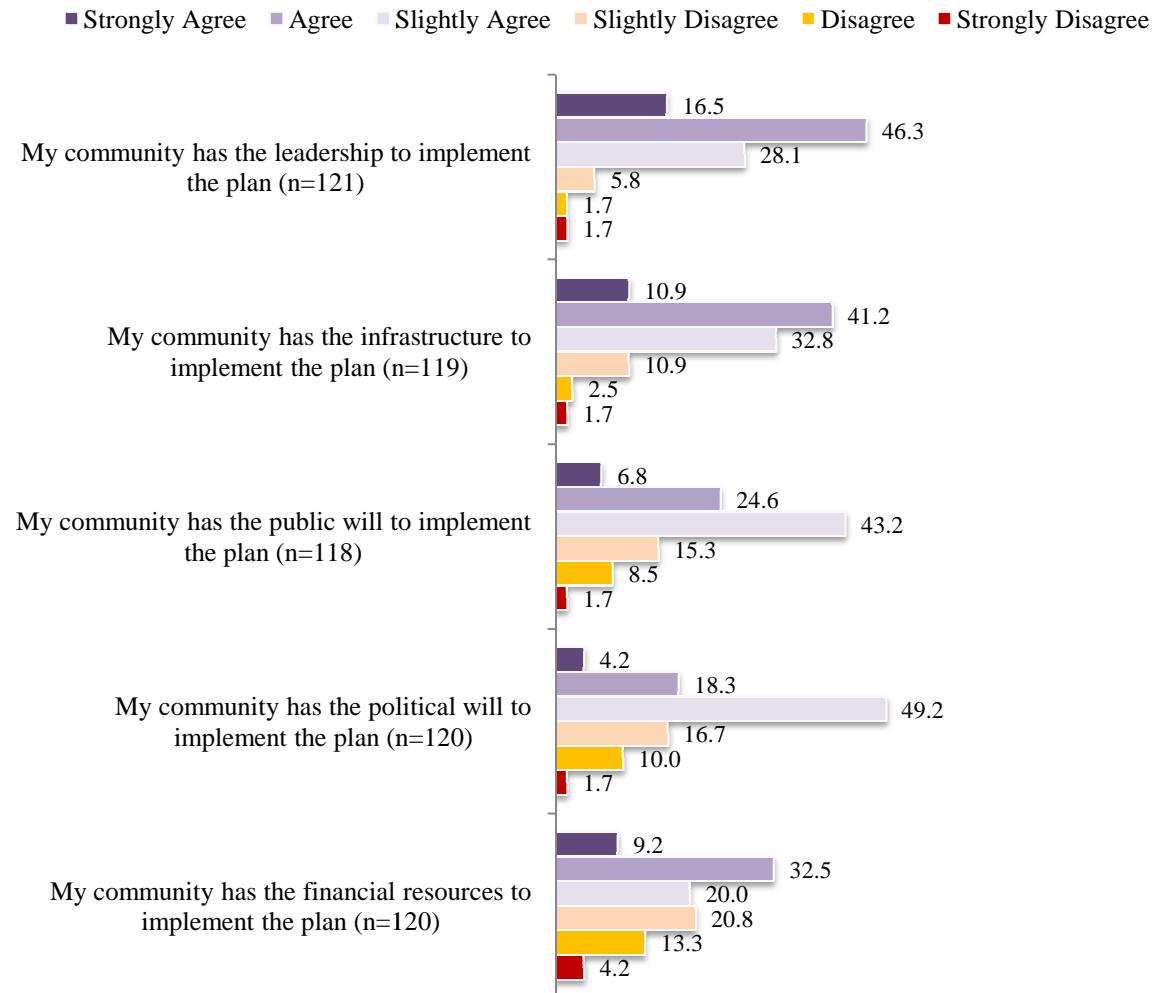
Source: Authors' tabulations of the LKC School Readiness Planning Survey

Note: \*=Not asked of the parent action team

Participants were also asked about contextual factors that may affect the ability of the community to implement the plan (see figure 5 below). Over 90% of survey respondents believed that the community has the leadership to implement the plan with 16.5% *strongly agreeing*, 46.3% *agreeing*, and 28.1% *slightly agreeing*. Survey respondents generally thought that the community had the infrastructure to implement the plan with approximately 85% *strongly agreeing*, *agreeing*, or *slightly agreeing*. However, respondents rated the political will, public will, and financial resources available for implementing the plan lower. About a quarter of respondents *slightly disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* that "My community has the

political will to implement the plan" and nearly half only *slightly agreed* with this statement. Similarly, about a quarter of respondents *slightly disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* with the statement that "My community has the public will to implement the plan." Almost 40% of respondents *slightly disagreed*, *disagreed*, or *strongly disagreed* with the statement "My community has the financial resources to implement the plan."

**Figure 5. Participant perceptions of the community's ability to implement the plan**



Source: Authors' tabulations of the LKC School Readiness Planning Survey

## Perceptions of the Larry King Center's Leadership in the School Readiness Planning Process

Several characteristics that have been linked to leadership include a) good communication skills, b) fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness among team members, c) empowering team members, and d) creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced.

Participants of the School Readiness planning process were asked to rate the degree to which the Larry King Center accomplished these tasks (see table 5). For each measure, over three quarters of respondents indicated that the LKC had accomplished that “*to a great extent*.” However, participants rated the LKC statistically significantly lower at including a diversity of people and organizations on the team than any other measure.<sup>b</sup>

**Table 5. Respondent perceptions of the degree to which the Larry King Center accomplished each of the following through the school readiness planning process**

	None	A little	Somewhat	To a great extent
<b>Communicated the vision for the school readiness initiative to the team members (n=110)</b>	0%	1.8%	11.8%	86.4%
<b>Fostered respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness among team members (n=110)</b>	0.9%	0.9%	14.6%	83.6%
<b>Included a diversity of people and organizations on the team (n=109)</b>	0.9%	5.5%	16.5%	77.1%
<b>Empowered team members (n=110)</b>	0%	1.8%	19.1%	79.1%
<b>Created an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced (n=110)</b>	0.9%	1.8%	13.6%	83.6%

*Source:* Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

<sup>b</sup>Results are from a multilevel ordinal logistic regression ( $p<.05$ ). The unit of analysis was question-respondent (i.e., One row per item (e.g., empowered team members) per respondent) and the dependent variable was an ordinal variable that ranged from 1 to 5 with 1 representing “none” and 5 representing “*to a great extent*”.

Participants shared their perspective of the LKC's ability to promote awareness of effective strategies, advocate for policy change, provide credible leadership, and leverage funds. Roughly three quarters of participants believed that the LKC could perform the first three functions “*to a great extent*.” However, participants were less confident in the ability of the LKC to leverage funds.<sup>c</sup>

**Table 6. Respondent perception of the degree to which the Larry King Center has the capacity to implement the following aspects of the school readiness plan**

	None	A little	Somewhat	To a great extent
<b>Promoting awareness of effective strategies (n=119)</b>	0.8%	1.7%	23.5%	74.0%
<b>Advocating for policy change (n=117)</b>	0.9%	4.3%	16.2%	78.6%
<b>Providing credible leadership (n=119)</b>	0.8%	1.7%	21.0%	76.5%
<b>Leveraging funds (n=117)</b>	0.9%	14.5%	51.3%	33.3%

*Source:* Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

## Participant Reflections of the School Readiness Plan

Participants reflected on the plan in several ways. Some participants offered support for the LKC's ability to lead the effort; others offered suggestions for how to improve the plan or reflected on potential barriers to implementation. We grouped these responses into several categories:

- Ability of the Larry King Center to lead this effort,
- Suggestions for improving the plan, and
- Barriers to implementation.

---

<sup>c</sup>Results are from a multilevel ordinal logistic regression ( $p<.05$ ). The unit of analysis was question-respondent (i.e., One row per item (e.g., advocating policy change) per respondent) and the dependent variable was an ordinal variable that ranged from 1 to 4 with 1 representing “none” and 4 representing “*to a great extent*”.

Several respondents commented positively regarding the ability of the LKC to lead this effort.

*I think LKC has the best chance of implementing this type of plan, but I am concerned about the divisive leadership of this community. Some political leaders at the state and local levels believe it is their role to obstruct any social initiative and to encourage public cynicism. I think this will be difficult to overcome.*

*The community is fortunate to have this organization which can focus on key issues that need to be addressed. It is important that the community and providers continue to assess the needs and guide the priorities, and LKC helps organize existing and new resources to guide the research and the action.*

*The process and work of the LKC was well planned and executed. It was an excellent experience. I have trust and faith in their ability to have the plan become a reality.*

*I think the Larry King Center at the Council for Children's Rights is the best equipped organization to lead the implementation of the plan with other organizations and government agencies.*

Several respondents offered suggestions for improving the plan. One respondent suggested work that would increase the amount of volunteering in the community, another suggested the need for business sector engagement, a third suggested the need for more community leaders at the launch of the plan, and a fourth suggested more publicity of the plan.

*The only thing I have to say is that there will never be enough money so I think that volunteers are key. Once someone has given of themselves it is hard to go back into your own little selfish world. Most people don't even know that they have it in them to give I mean. There should be a push in this town to be the town with the most volunteers and not just for children the homeless as well as the elderly. If at the beginning of each school year each class no matter the grade had to pick an organization to help. Maybe? then parents could follow the example of the children of this community and yes even shame them in to doing the same...*

*The business community still fails to see how early childhood education can prevent failure in school and in life for disadvantaged children. Until we get the business sector to understand this we will not get the political and financial support we need to implement the plan.*

*I don't know if our community has the political will to implement the plan. What would have given me a better confidence in that respect would have been attendance at the launch breakfast of MORE community leaders.*

*I think that once the report went public after the release meeting, more publicity could have been created. I think that because many in the community did not know about its release, this could be viewed as a barrier to overall implementation. I think an editorial in the newspaper would benefit the LKC greatly to increase awareness of their plan.*

One respondent thought that many key elements were missing from the plan.

*The plan appears to serve the needs of the school system rather than the needs of the children and their families. Where is the piece that provides for the parent as the educational advocate for their child? Where is the piece that connects through meaningful transition ECE to public school kindergarten? Where do the schools discuss the link between family literacy and child literacy?*

Respondents were specifically asked to reflect about the potential barriers to implementing the plan. Many respondents commented on the lack of funding and resources to implement the plan.

*The recession has required that non-profits and service providers do more with less. As this continues to take its toll on NPOs and service providers, I am concerned about capacity to implement the plan.*

*Funding is the major barrier. The early care and education system in North Carolina (and Mecklenburg County) is in the midst of significant budget cuts at the state level. It will be even more difficult to bridge that gap.*

Other respondents noted the lack of political will and public will.

*I feel the political will of the community has moved away from seeing the value of educating all the children. They talk the money talk, but when presented with the savings of educating and preparing young children for learning they prefer to wait until they can imprison those that do not make it. The media does not show much public will for our schools. This has been the history of the paper here over the many years.*

*We've come up with good plans in the past. This one is probably the best yet. The problem however is not coming up with the perfect plan, it's execution over the long haul. How will the Larry King Center build and sustain the political and public will to execute the plan and sustain the commitment to school readiness? How will the LKC become the conscience of the community, trusted by service providers, consumers and donors? This will require ongoing relationship building that makes it possible to speak truth to all constituents with respect and frankness.*

Other ideas that were expressed by one or a few respondents included lack of awareness, community buy-in, ability to sustain the momentum, turf issues among organizations, lack of good public leadership, lack of representation of the broader community, and the need to further build relationships.

*Lack of knowledge about at needs populations, making plans and policies based on lack of knowledge of priorities of populations to be served.*

*People getting discouraged with the time, effort, public education, and political action that it takes to bring about lasting change.*

*The absence of relationships that are sufficiently broad & deep throughout the community to enable true inclusiveness. The LKC has come up with an excellent draft of a plan. The community involvement in drafting that plan was necessarily pro forma, and I doubt made a significant contribution to the final draft of the plan. And this is appropriate - drafting by large volunteer committees is rarely successful. The real test of inclusiveness comes in the manner in which the plan's components are implemented and*

*evaluated. Implementation and evaluation requires just as much expertise as creating a plan. But if LKC takes the time and expends the effort both to explain and listen to the plan's many constituencies, implementation and evaluation will be more effective and there will be greater political and public will to sustain the effort. The kind of explaining and listening required here takes trust and that trust comes from relationships nurtured over time. This is the really tough work I think.*

Community members plan to be involved in the implementation of the action plan. Individuals responded to a question about the extent to which they plan to be involved (see table 7 below). Not surprisingly, the Early School Readiness team members were the most likely to report plans for being very involved (64.7%). Approximately seventy-three percent of Ready Schools team members plan to be *somewhat involved*.

**Table 7. Participants' expected participation in plan implementation**

Action Team	Very involved	Somewhat involved	A little involved	Monitor progress, but not actively involved	Don't plan to be involved
<b>Ready Families (n=21)</b>	28.6%	61.9%	9.5%	0%	0%
<b>Ready Health (n=10)</b>	30.0%	70.0%	0%	0%	0%
<b>Ready Early Care (n=17)</b>	64.7%	11.8%	11.8%	11.8%	0%
<b>Ready Communities (n=16)</b>	43.8%	43.8%	0%	12.5%	0%
<b>Ready Schools (n=11)</b>	9.1%	72.7%	0%	18.2%	0%
<b>Parent Action Team (n=15)</b>	53.3%	20.0%	6.7%	13.3%	6.7%
<b>Non Action Team Participants (n=30)</b>	33.3%	40.0%	6.7%	16.7%	3.3%

*Source:* Authors' tabulations of the Larry King Center School Readiness Planning Survey

## Summary and Conclusions

The LKC has recently begun the initial phase of a plan to promote community change in one focus area: early school readiness. This report summarizes the LKC's theory of change, describes the initial planning phase for the school readiness action plan, and highlights the participants' perspectives regarding the planning process. The report also examines the perceptions of how the implementation of the plan will go from community engagement partners and the action team members. By incorporating feedback from the community, the LKC can use this information to improve the process for future initiatives. Moreover, the participants' feedback on potential barriers to plan implementation can lend insight into some areas where the LKC may want to focus attention as this plan is implemented.

Below is a summary of some of the major highlights from the report and recommended next steps.

- *Interest in the topic, either professionally- or personally motivated participation in the action team process.* Others were drawn to the process by their respect for the leadership of the LKC, their interest in being part of the decision making process, and for opportunities to network and learn what others in the community are doing.
- *Elements related to the success of a multi-agency effort were apparent in the action planning process.* Nearly all action team members felt that the planning process incorporated strong leadership, adequate administration and management, and was efficient. For example, action team members felt that their contributions were respected at the meetings (98.9% *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*). Action team members felt that the objectives for each meeting were clear (98.9% *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*) and that the meetings were a productive use of time (95.6% *slightly agreed, agreed, or strongly agreed*).
- *Community engagement partners and action team members rated the school readiness plan highly.* Over 90% of respondents rated the overall school readiness plan as *excellent* (25.8%), *very good* (49.2%), or *good* (17.2%) – and none of the respondents indicated that the plan was *poor*. Almost all respondents believed that the plan focuses on the right priorities.

- *The Larry King Center was considered to have displayed strong leadership skills.*  
Respondents generally thought that the LKC had accomplished the following “*to a great extent*”: communicating the vision of school readiness (86.4%); fostering respect, trust, inclusiveness, and openness among team members (83.6%); including a diversity of people and organizations on the team (77.1%); empowering team members (79.1%); and creating an environment where differences of opinion can be voiced (83.6%).
- *The diversity of the individuals involved in the planning process could be expanded.*  
Respondents generally felt that the LKC included a diverse group of people and organizations on the team with 77.1% of respondents indicating this “*to a great extent*” and 16.5% indicating this *somewhat*. However, relative to other measures of the LKC’s leadership on school readiness (such as communication of the vision and empowerment of team members), this measure was rated lower. Many participants provided feedback on the inclusion of a more diverse group including representatives of the Hispanic population, community leaders, business leaders, and school personnel.
- *Contextual factors may pose challenges for implementing the plan.* While most respondents tended to feel that the plan would be implemented, respondents suggested that contextual barriers may prevent implementation. The three barriers to plan implementation most often cited by participants were *funding, political will, and public will*. This suggests that the LKC may need to devote increased effort to overcoming these hurdles in order to make progress on the school readiness initiative.

As the LKC works with community agencies to build a system for early school readiness, the lessons learned through this process can guide resource use. The respondents to this survey acknowledged the leadership skills of the LKC but raised questions about the availability of resources and the community’s political will and public will to implement the plan. Addressing these factors will be an essential step into implanting the school readiness plan.

## References

1. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT. *Getting ready: Findings from the National School Readiness Indicators Initiative a 17 state partnership*. Providence, RI2005.
2. Clark LY. *Unlocking the potential of a community: The plan for school readiness*. Charlotte, NC: The Larry King Center for Building Children's Futures; 2001.
3. Weiss ES, Anderson RM, Lasker RD. Making the most of collaboration: Exploring the relationship between partnership synergy and partnership functioning. *Health Education & Behavior*. 2002;29:638.
4. Post LA, Raile ANW, Raile ED. Defining political will. *Politics & Policy*. 2010;38(4):653-676.
5. Salmon CT, Post LA, Christensen RE. *Mobilizing public will for social change*. Lansing, MI: Michigan State University;2003.